FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT
October 28, 2001

ORDINARY PEOPLE
John M. Buchanan

God before me, God behind me,
God above me, God beneath me.
I on your path O God
You, O God, on my way.
In the twistings of the road
In the currents of the river
Be with me by day
Be with me by night
Be with me by day and by night.

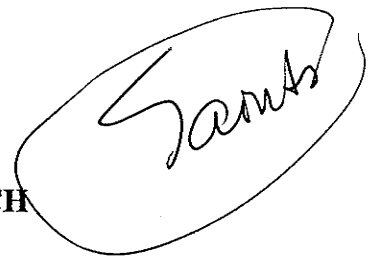
J. Philip Newell
Celtic Prayers from Iona

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago
126 East Chestnut Street, Chicago, IL 60611-2094
(312) 787-4570

ORDINARY PEOPLE
October 28, 2001

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH



Psalm 65
Luke 21:5-9
2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18

Dear God, as we come into your presence this morning, we know we are not alone. With us are those who taught us to believe and trust in you, those who taught us to love and care and give. They are with you now and they are our saints. We thank you for them. As we worship, surround us with their love—in your love—that we might know you more clearly, follow you more nearly, and love you, and our neighbors more dearly, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

I love the covers of the *New Yorker* magazine. They are colorful, whimsical, and thought provoking. Often they capture the sense of the moment in American culture. The cover of this week's edition of the magazine was particularly good, I thought. It's the Halloween issue. Clusters of little children are trick-or-treating in a Manhattan neighborhood, trudging up and down a leaf-strewn sidewalk, sacks of goodies in hand, climbing up a flight of stairs to knock on the door of a brownstone, as an eager couple peers out the window along with a jolly pumpkin. But this year, instead of donning Batman, Spiderman, and Power Ranger getups, each of the children is dressed up as either a New York firefighter or a police officer.

That stopped me in my tracks this week: ordinary people, who lost their lives just doing their jobs. Ordinary people who have become for us a reminder that ordinary people have within themselves the potential to do extraordinary things. Ordinary people who, on the eleventh of September 2001, became heroes, saints perhaps.

"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."

They did—thanks be to God. This is the week of All Saints' Day, November 1, Thursday. And this year in their name we might begin our reflection by giving God thanks for them and for that potential in all of us.

The philosopher Ernest Becker said that while the word *hero* seems too big, too romantic for most of us, the truth is that "to strive to be a hero, to rise above the mediocre, really to count for something extraordinary, to outshine death, to be capable of the highest generosity, to feel sacrifice, is what we most deeply need and want" (see Tom Long in *Theology Today*, July 1994).

Two thousand years ago a man awaiting his death in a Roman jail cell wrote, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." I love these words. They say what needs to be said about the heroes of September 11. They occur to me often when a friend, a dear

Luther chose October 31 to post his theses because it was the day before All Saints' Day, the Eve of All Hallows, from which we get the word *Halloween,* the occasion when the spirits of the dead are out and about. The idea of saints was at the heart of Luther's argument with the church. The church created saints, and the argument went that the saints were so good, so righteous, that they accumulated more righteousness than they needed to get into heaven. The excess righteousness was available to common sinners. In fact, you could purchase some for yourself or for your relatives. The Vatican issued documents called indulgences, the purchase of which gave the owner enough righteousness to reduce his time in purgatory. In the early sixteenth century, the Vatican sent a sales force out to peddle indulgences—in fact, financed the completion of St. Peter's by the sale. Luther wanted to debate that. He believed—and no one now argues with him (*A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*—his hymn—is now sung in Catholic churches too)— Luther believed that scripture teaches that salvation is God's gracious gift to humanity in Jesus Christ, that you cannot earn it, only gratefully accept it. You certainly can't buy it from the church. And that simple but revolutionary idea—that Christian faith is more about living in gratitude to God for the gift of God's love than it is about trying to please God by obeying rules, defending beliefs, practicing rituals, accumulating righteousness by buying indulgences—is why we celebrate Reformation Sunday in worship today.

Much happened at the Reformation that was necessary and much happened that was unfortunate, tragic: the total disappearance of the idea of saints, for instance. Because the idea of saints and their accumulated righteousness was at the heart of what the Reformation thought was wrong with the church, the whole apparatus simply disappeared from Protestantism. And that, I think, is too bad. Not that I want to reintroduce the idea of indulgences—although it is tempting during stewardship season. The chair of the stewardship campaign in a church I served years ago once said to me, "You know, you could help us out a little bit here if you'd just tell them they're going to hell if they don't raise their pledges." I do, however, hope to reintroduce the idea of saints—as ordinary people who do extraordinary things and through whom God's work of healing, restoring, building, and creating gets done on earth. And I do very much wish to reintroduce the idea that we are not in this business alone: that we are "surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses" the book of Hebrews puts it. That each of us has saints: those precious people who have helped shape us, inspired us, who loved us enough to correct us, who picked us up when we fell, whom we know and only know from afar, those whose lives inspire us and continue to illuminate our lives—our saints.

Saints, Frederick Buechner wrote are not "plaster statues, men and women of such paralyzing virtue that they never thought a nasty thought or did an evil thing their whole life long." "Saints," Buechner says, "are essentially life givers. To be with them is to become more alive" (*Wishful Thinking,* p. 102).

Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor, whose church has kept the idea of saints alive, says, "What makes a saint is extravagance—excessive love, flagrant mercy, radical affection, exorbitant charity, immoderate faith, intemperate hope, inordinate love" (*Weavings*, Sept.-Oct. 1988, p. 34).

So you have saints. They may still be around. They may have joined the church eternal, the "vast cloud of witnesses" that the Bible talks about. Either way they are the ones who have shaped and

Richard Lischer, who teaches at Duke University, is a minister who has written about his first pastorate in southern Illinois, in a small rural community. He remembers a telephone call one night to come to the hospital. A baby was born with what the physician said were "multiple deficits" and was not expected to live. The parents, members of his congregation, wanted their baby baptized.

> When I entered the unit, I found it arranged for a baptism. They had pushed the incubator to one side. A hush had fallen over the room, as parents of other newborns stayed to themselves and cooed over their babies. The parents, the nurses, the residents, and the pastor stood in a semicircle around the incubator. Everyone was gowned and the nurses were in masks. Leeta and Shane, the parents, appeared to be in shock. One of the nurses opened the lid of the small white humming cylinder, and I extended a moistened finger into the chamber. I made the sign of the cross on the baby's blue chest. . . . I touched one of his downy eyebrows and said, "Shane Arlo Vachel Weams, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."
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> And the witnesses said, "Amen." That was an amen on earth, choked out by five witnesses in an atmosphere of muffled sorrow, and, I believe, it was an amen in heaven, echoed by many other witnesses who see all things. We knew we were participating in something larger than ourselves, and so did the other parents standing, respectfully, on the far side of the unit. They also bowed their heads and some made the sign of the cross. I could have baptized Shane Arlo many times over that day with the tears of the witnesses." (*Open Secrets: A Spiritual Journey through a Country Church*, pp. 223-225)

The communion of saints: ordinary people, like you and me, through whom God does extraordinary things. Ordinary people who continue to bear witness and to influence and inspire. Ordinary people who "fought the good fight, finished the race, kept the faith."

Thanks be to God.

Amen.